

Naturalist notebook

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NATURALIST NOTEBOOK

MARCH 1971

VOLUME VII

NO. 3

THAMES SCIENCE CENTER, INC.
GALLows LANE
NEW LONDON, CONNECTICUT 06320

FRONT COVER

"WHITE FOOTED MOUSE"

Photo by Martha Capizzano

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The Month Of Reawakening

MARCH

As day lengths are increased by the March sun, it warms the earth-bound homes of winter hibernators. The heat causes an increase in blood circulation, respiration and body metabolism. Thus, there is a renewed need for energy in the spring.



To the Woodchuck (also known as a Ground Hog or Marmot), South-east Connecticut's only true hibernating ground mammal, it has been a long winter indeed. He is thin and very hungry since his most recent meal was last fall! As nature follows its course, some tender, succulent plants would certainly taste good, but, Oh bliss! Oh rapture! . . . it's also mating season. Two to six

naked, blind babies are born in early May after three and one-half weeks gestation. Their home is in a long, deep burrow in open fields that often provides protective shelter for many other animals.

Hunger is not a major concern to the chipmunk in spring since he stores food before hibernating and sleeps on a bed of food, eating during the winter in his underground apartment. After mating in late March, males and females again compete for territorial rights. Often, both will return



to their winter homes until another warm day, if they still have a supply of food. Mother chipmunk tends to her first litter of babies (a second litter may be born in August) and they leave home to forage for themselves after they are six weeks old and two-thirds grown.

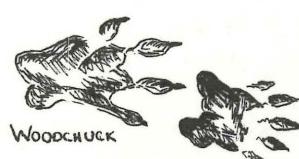
Bats also begin to emerge from winter caves, but only on unusually warm March days when there is a supply of insects for food. One or two babies are not born until late June or July.

Among Southeast Connecticut's semi-hibernators are the raccoon, skunk, and opossum. All three fatten themselves before winter, and although they hibernate in the northern states, they still hunt for food at night following warm winter days. Raccoons and skunks mate in March, but the opossum gives birth then. Her large litter of tiny babies mature in the mother's fur-lined, belly pouch.

A March nor'easter does not keep these animals secluded. Immediate survival (food) and survival of the species (mating) force these animals out into the snow. Looking for animal tracks in March is more challenging than in winter months because there are so many more animals that roam in the spring. Could you identify their tracks if you found them in the snow?



SKUNK



WOODCHUCK



RACCOON



CHIPMUNK



OPOSSUM

THE MARCH CALENDAR

MARCH IS THE MONTH OF COOL WINDY DAYS.

March 1... The first Wood-chuck was seen last year.

March 4... Woodcocks began a spectacular nocturnal courtship flight last year... two weeks early!

March 6... Chipmunks emerge.

March 7... The first crocus are in bloom above the snow.

March 7... Grey squirrels begin mating and building their nests.

March 8... Male Flickers in the woods and Red-winged Blackbirds in the marshes begin calling.

March 10... Snowdrops are in flower.

March 11... The full Worm moon.

March 17... Day equals night... 12 hours each.

March 18... Wood Ducks arrive from the south.

March 21... Spring begins at 1:38 A.M.

March 23... Ospreys return to nests, the same sites as previous years.

March 23... Spring Peepers begin calling in thawed ponds on warm spring nights.

March 27... Painted turtles will be sunning themselves on warm pond rocks.

March 28... The first Tree Swallows arrive.

March 29... Greater Yellowlegs and Common Egrets can be found in our coastal marshes.



HEADS UP !

by Robert L. Dyer

Last month I stressed the ease with which one can become an astronomer. Late winter is a good time to become familiar with the sky at night, but before you can find your way in unfamiliar territory, you need to get your bearings; likewise, one needs a few landmarks to help find one's way around the sky. Before you rush out of doors to learn the night sky, you should first select a night when there is little or no moonlight to interfere with your observations. Secondly, you will enjoy astronomy much more if you are comfortable while outside. A reclining chair, warm blankets, and a thermos of coffee or tea can make quite a difference in the comfort factor. Do not try to learn everything at one time. If you learn only one new star or constellation in an evening, and learn it well, you are making good progress.

Now you are ready to begin. Start by facing South some evening an hour or two after sunset this March. If you face the sunset, South is on your left. One of the most conspicuous constellations will be Orion, the Hunter, a large rectangular group of stars which is located above the horizon somewhat west of South. You will probably first notice the three stars of equal brightness in a straight line that form the Hunter's belt. North of the belt are two stars forming the shoulders

BETELGEUSE

SIRIUS

RIGEL

and south of the belt are two stars for the feet. These four stars of the shoulders and feet form the large rectangle which encloses the three belt stars about midway. At the northeast corner of the rectangle, is an orange-red star called Betelgeuse and diagonally across the rectangle in the southwest corner is a bluish-white star known as Rigel.

Rigel and Betelgeuse are of nearly equal brightness and are considered "first magnitude" stars. The first magnitude stars will be our landmarks to the constellations because they are the brightest stars visible. Second magnitude stars such as the three in Orion's belt are fainter than the first magnitude stars. Under ideal observing conditions, your eye will be able to detect stars as faint as sixth magnitude.

It is important to understand that the apparent position of the stars and constellations changes with both the time of day and the season of the year. Therefore, Orion will not always be in the same position each night, but will move gradually westward across the heavens as a result of the earth's revolution about the sun. Orion rises in the east at the time of sunset during late fall and by the end of March Orion will set in the west at the time of sunset. Since the earth also rotates about its axis, the stars appear to move from east to west across the sky at the rate of fifteen degrees per hour. Because of the earth's rotation, this same apparent movement from east to west also occurs in a period of twelve hours during a single night.

Using Orion as your guide, draw a line through the three stars of Orion's belt from right to left (northwest to southeast) continuing in that direction until you intersect a very bright star. This is the brightest star in the sky and is called Sirius in the constellation of Canis Major, the big dog.

Try to find your way in the sky this March.

A SMELL OF SPRING

by Ruth M. Ritter

Ever heard of pheromones? They sound as if they might be big, mean beasts from some exotic land, don't they? Actually they are chemicals produced by an animal which affects others of the same species or, in a word, odors. But these "odors" are special because they are a form of communication just as sights and sounds are for humans. E.O. Wilson has suggested that perhaps somewhere there is a civilization which communicates just on tastes and smells. If that sounds far-out, consider the gypsy moth.

This moth was introduced into this country in 1869 by a man who hoped to cross the gypsy moth and silkworm moth to produce a hardy silkworm for New England. Since then it has spread through the forests of the northeast and its caterpillars defoliate thousands of acres of trees yearly.

In hopes of removing or curtailing the destruction of this moth, much research has been done. It has been found that the female secretes a chemical which attracts male gypsy moths from amazing distances: 100 ft? 100 yds? no, more like a mile or two! And yet the amount given off is minute. If we could smell all the pheromones in the air in the spring and summer we'd be amazed at their number and diversity. But the amount of each kind for each species is tiny. What is marvelous to consider is that the male's antennae can sense it all!

The gypsy moth's pheromone has been called "gyplure", a most appropriate name. When synthesized artificially it can be used to attract males to a spot where they can be killed, sterilized or just plain confused so that no mating can occur. The advantage of knowing about these pheromones and then using them as an "insecticide" is that they are both species-specific and non-toxic... it won't harm any other organism, or even the pest, by itself. Imagine the frustration of a poor male gypsy moth zooming off towards what he thinks is a gorgeous female, only to find a tree, cage or waiting human.

PACKAGED FOR SURVIVAL

by Stephan Syz

Who said winter is drab and shapeless? What about the dark shadows of branches cast on the white snow or the multitude of twigs dotted with buds of exquisite colors and configurations engineered by nature?

Like tiny seeds, buds cling to twigs awaiting spring to call them to action. The intricate coats of buds are absolute necessities which nature has designed to protect the delicate membranes that will become flowers, leaves and branches from parasites, snow and ice and the extremely drying winter winds. The scales must fit together exactly and to accomplish this nature has produced scales of a myriad of angles and shapes.

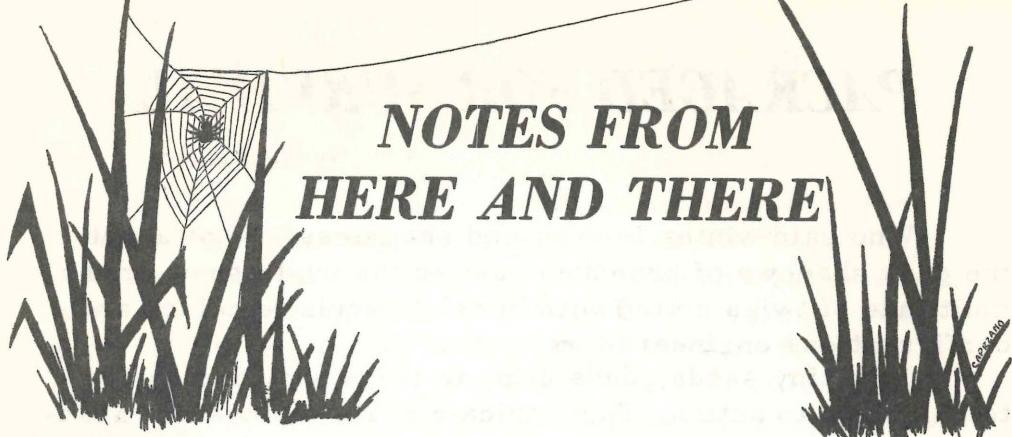
The oak buds have tight fitting, precise, vertical rows of pointed scales, the furry willow buds are enclosed in a single cap-shaped scale, some viburnums have scales that look like little half-formed leaves and the butternuts have fur-coated buds.

The butternut's fur coat is not there to keep it warm. Indeed, just as an animal's fur coat slows down wind so that warm insulating air pockets form, so does the bud's pubescence calm the wind at the bud's surface. With water frozen in the soil a tree must conserve all the moisture it can. The tiny hairs prevent the rushing wind from carrying away precious moisture.

A magnifying glass may reveal tiny black aphid eggs cemented to black birch and other buds. These aphids are camped on the bud's doorstep waiting for the day when scales will open to admit them.

The roles a bud plays in a plant are many. Some become twigs, flowers or leaves, while the leaf buds of barberry become spines. The terminal buds of the elm are missing. A bud on the side of the twig moves over to take its place creating the familiar zigzag of elm twigs.

If you haven't done so yet, get out and observe some of these before it's too late.



NOTES FROM HERE AND THERE

THE UNDERWATER PHOTOGRAPHY EXHIBIT BY WILLIAM BOOTH is an excellent show. Have you seen it yet? SEVERAL GIFTS HAVE BEEN RECEIVED BY ORGANIZATIONS AND INDIVIDUALS for use in our new building and for which we are most appreciative. They include:

BOOKS FOR THE LIBRARY

Set of 8 Darling books - Mrs. Lois Darling
America the Beautiful - Miss Ruth Newcomb
Seven nature books - Mrs. Roy Taylor
Nature books - Dr. Richard H. Goodwin
Dr. William A. Niering

BOOK PLATES - John F. Gardner

CARD TABLE - Mrs. R. F. McConnell

DISPLAY WALLS - Garden Clubs of S.E. Conn.

DRIFTWOOD AT ENTRANCE - Mrs. David Kimball

LIBRARY CONFERENCE TABLE - Mrs. C. C.

Patterson

MAGAZINES

Audubon - Mrs. Alice P. Holcombe

The Conservationist - Homer S. Kelsey

Sea Frontiers and

Sea Secrets - Mrs. Elizabeth C. Noyes

PRESSED WILDFLOWER PICTURE - Mrs. C. H. Allen

PROJECTOR CASE and

SLIDE SELECTOR - Mrs. John Kashanski

ROCK COLLECTION - Mrs. James Hollister

THIRTY-CUP COFFEE MAKER - Perry Jewelers

STAINLESS STEEL COFFEE/TEA and

SUGAR AND CREAMER WITH TRAY - Thames Garden

Club and New London Garden Club

MISCELLANEOUS CLASSROOM AND MUSEUM

ITEMS - Donated by many, many, many people!

WORKING WITH THE OSPREYS, an endangered Connecticut bird, will be the topic of a program by Mr. Paul Spitzer, Cornell University, Department of Ornithology, on March 26, 8:00 P.M. at the East Lyme High School Auditorium and sponsored by the East Lyme Conservation Commission. By reputation, it will be an excellent program and not to be missed!

FRIEND OF THE CENTER: Miss Jessie Watters has renewed her "Friend" membership.

RIVER TOURING ON THE CONNECTICUT RIVER: The Outing Club would like to sponsor an overnight canoe trip. Anyone willing to lend us a canoe or who knows where we can borrow one, please call 443-4295.

NEW MEMBERS OF THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS were elected at the Annual Dinner on January 28. They are Dr. George S. Avery, Jr., former head of the Brooklyn Botanic Garden, Mr. Royce Gray, a banker, and Attorney Frank L. McGuire. Two Board members' terms expired: Mrs. Francis F. McGuire and Lt. Cmdr. Bruce Patterson.

THE NEW LONDON COUNTY BIRD CLUB will comb the Rhode Island beaches from Watch Hill to Moonstone on Sunday, March 14. Meet at 8:00 A.M., Dunn's Corners - first traffic light east of Westerly, about three or four miles beyond town on Route 1. Bring a lunch if you want to continue past noon to include Galilee and Point Judith.

JUNIOR CURATOR PROGRAM: T.S.C. is organizing a group of Junior Curators who will be responsible for feeding and caring for museum animals and maintaining exhibits. Each person will be fully trained and a rotating schedule will be established so that all the Junior Curators will have an opportunity to work. Both boys and girls of junior and senior high school ages who are interested in this program will meet on Saturday, March 6, from 9:00 to 11:30 A.M. at the Science Center. Wear work clothes.

FROM SEA TO STREAM

*Text and Illustrations
by Barbara Kashanski*

ELSIE

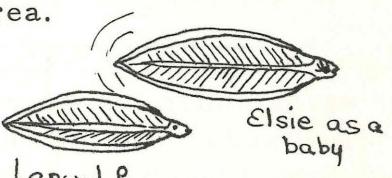
March is a time of change. Winter changes to spring, ice and snow change to water, short days change to longer days, animals and insects change from winter sleep to spring activity, and I (to keep in the spirit of things!) am going to change my article from plants and animals along the shore to those found in ponds and streams.

I have found the perfect creature to help me smoothly change from salt to fresh water. A creature who is born in salt water but then spends most of its life in streams, ponds or lakes... The American Eel. The life history of eels wasn't clearly understood until 1925 when a Danish marine biologist, Johanner Schmidt, did extensive research at various depths over large areas of the Atlantic Ocean.



Sargassum Seaweed

Elsie was one of millions of eggs laid in the Sargasso Sea. When she hatched, she didn't look like an eel at all, but more like a small, flat, transparent leaf.



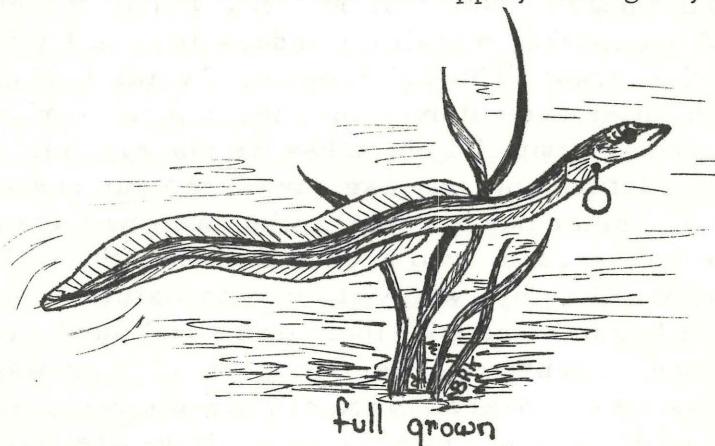
Slowly Elsie floated and drifted towards that surface of the ocean until she was caught in the Gulf Stream which carried her towards the eastern coast of the United States. It took about a year to make this long and dangerous journey. Many fish, large and small, wanted to put baby

eel on their menu. During the year it took to reach the coast, Elsie stayed in her larval form, but once she began to get near land her figure became a lovely little eel about three inches long. At this size she was called an elver. Elsie swam



Elsie as an
ELVER

along the coast until she found the river she wanted to travel up - it was probably the same river her mother came down a little over a year before. It was spring when Elsie traveled many miles up the river, then up smaller streams until she reached a lake. Here she lived happily eating anything she



full grown

could find, dead or alive - insects, fish, frogs, and plants. She was a three or four foot lovely, slippery, dark female eel. It took her eight years to become fully grown and then, all of a sudden, Elsie stopped eating! Her skin turned white and shimmery. It was time to begin the long journey back-to the sea. She traveled by night and rested during the day. Near the base of the river Elsie met other eels traveling down the streams towards the ocean. Some were the male eels which had stayed near the base of the streams. After many, many days of traveling, Elsie reached her birth-place, the Sargasso Sea. She sank down deep into the dark waters and laid her eggs. Soon she died and left her story to be told again in the spring by one of her babies. Watch for them!

FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S DESK

By Robert S. Treat

"I wish to speak a word for Nature..." wrote Thoreau, encouraging us to discover a freedom and an understanding of life by contact with wildness. Years later, in The Immense Journey, Loren Eiseley added that "the important thing is that each man possess such a wildness and that he consider what marvels are to be observed there."

Life is a mystery constantly beckoning us to seek it and unravel the myriad threads which encase "earth's dark millennial heart." Our materialistic world, however, is filled with gimmicks, metallic wonders and mechanical devices which conceal. Through movies, TV and radio, together with cities and automobiles, the natural world is removed and an artificial one takes its place. Thus we not only block Nature out, we lose our touch, our connection with it. Consider our ancestors who lived by the sun and followed the seasons, who needed the land, the forests, fields and seas to live by, who worked with Nature, using the rhythm of life to blend with their own. Such contacts gave assurance, a sense of order, purpose and meaning to life. Yet as we discovered more of Nature's secrets, we covered up much of our own meaning. If we are tragic today, surely one fundamental reason is our divorce from the land. Rather than loving Nature, we have conquered and abandoned her, failing to understand our role and dependence on her. The results have been rape and desertion, but no happiness in our victory. We have failed to "consider what marvels were there."

Thoreau also said, "In wildness is the preservation of the world," a truth we must come to understand in the fullest sense. If "the important thing is for each man to possess such a wildness," we had better act on that belief for our wilderness is fast disappearing. Spring is on the horizon, another rebirth, another chance to be alive and to live, not just exist. Will we miss its message and opportunity, or will we come to understand with Thoreau that man is "an inhabitant, or part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society"?

BOOKS, BOOKS, BOOKS!

by Margo Hirschberg

There are many exciting changes taking place at the Center, and the library is no exception.

After several months of weighing the relative merits of the hundreds of books we should have, or would like to have, we finally narrowed our list down to just over a hundred books and magazines we can afford, picking those we feel are most necessary to a natural science library.

Eighty-one books have been ordered so far. Some of these are in the library already, and more are coming every day. Approximately thirty more books and magazines will be ordered in the near future. They are written for all ages from children through adult, and will add greatly to the collection already in our library.

We have tried to cover a wide range of subjects in the natural sciences. This will include a number of field guides, such as the Peterson and Golden series, covering everything from the ocean to the sky.

Since we are all particularly concerned with the problems of ecology, pollution, and conservation, a number of very fine books on these subjects have been purchased.

Choosing the books would have been a much more difficult task without the invaluable assistance of Dr. DeSanto, Dr. Goodwin, and Dr. Niering. A great deal of help was also given by the staffs of the Niantic and Waterford libraries.

In addition to these books, we are fortunate in having fine books and magazines donated by members of the Center. These are very much appreciated and will add greatly to everyone's enjoyment of the Center.

GROWING GOOD FOOD

by Martha Capizzano

Why not know that the food you eat is nutritious and safe from pesticides and other poisons? Why not try organic gardening, and March is the month to begin planting your seeds indoors.

Most people are confused as to how and where to begin...the latter is the easiest problem to solve. Any house or apartment is not too crowded or small to find room for a few tiny seeds or plants. If you are a new gardener and have to buy your seeds, there are usually directions on the back of the packet so that you will not be too terribly confused as to specific seed requirements of a particular plant. The directions will assume, however, that you already know there are a few necessities for germination and sustaining healthy life: Light, Temperature, Oxygen, Moisture, Drainage and Soil.

To the first of these requirements, a beginner will lament the lack of a sunny window. You don't need one. Use lights... Yes, either artificial light using a special Gro-Lux bulb or a combination of cool fluorescent bulbs and an incandescent bulb are convenient and sometimes more successful than ole Mister Sun himself. Place the Gro-Lux or the fluorescent bulbs about four inches above the tiny plants, raising the light as the plants grow. The incandescent light becomes hot, however, and will burn the plants if it is too close. These bulbs should be about two feet or more away from the plants...allowing for variables at different locations (near a window, on the floor or table, near a cool door, in the basement, etc.) Place a thermometer near the plants for a few days and experiment for yourself to make sure that the plants' temperature is not above 70 to 80 degrees. If you use a window for light, be sure to turn your planting boxes at least once a day and again make sure that the sun is not too hot to burn the tiny plants.

Temperature can be critical with some plants. Some seeds germinate best at a cold temperature and should be planted directly in the garden about mid-March when the ground is nearly unfrozen but there is still a danger of a killing frost. (The last killing frost in S. E. Conn. is about April 15.)

These seeds include peas, broccoli, celery, onions, and lettuce. Other plants like it cool and should be planted about three or four weeks before the last frost and they include beets, carrots, parsley and radishes. Squash, green beans, sweet corn and melon seeds should be planted when it is warm and there is no danger of frost. Tomatoes and peppers should also be planted when it is warm, but the seeds of these plants should be started indoors about mid-March.

Moisture must be maintained at all times, but soil that is drenched is too wet, and soil that feels dry to the touch is too dry. Newly planted seeds and tiny plants should be sprayed with a fine mist... do not use a sprinkling can as this will move dirt from around the seeds or tiny roots. Seeds that require darkness to germinate can be covered with a newspaper, and this will also conserve moisture. Those seeds that need light for germination can be covered with a pane of glass, but be sure that the condensed water beads do not drip on the soil or seeds. Turn the glass or dry it daily with a clean cloth.

Drainage and moisture are dependent on each other. On the bottom of your planting pots or planting boxes, be sure there are drainage holes, and these holes should be covered with a layer of stones, bricks or other drainage material. Old broken pieces of clay flower pots are best.

Soil is extremely important; moisture, drainage and oxygen about the roots will be little problem if the proper soil is used. It is most critical, if disease to the young plants is to be avoided, that the soil be sterile. Whatever soil you choose, place it in the oven for at least fifteen minutes at 200 degrees... and also sterilize your planting boxes. A recommended, nutritious starting soil can be made from equal parts of sand, loam and compost. Do not use commercial starting soil... it has been treated with chemicals to sterilize it. Vermiculite or sphagnum moss are good for starting seeds; both these mediums are already sterile. After the seeds germinate, tiny plants will need to be transplanted in the above soil mixture.

Your efforts will be well worth your time, and now is the time to start your summer garden.

FIELD NOTES

Mystic and Stonington: During the second week in January, a COOPER'S HAWK was observed preying on a small bird at a feeder on Darling Hill. A male PINTAIL was seen on the Mystic River under I-95 on Jan. 23.

Lyme and Essex: On Jan. 8, a YELLOW-HEADED BLACKBIRD was seen feeding in a yard on Ferry Road in Old Lyme. An immature BALD EAGLE was on a cake of ice in the Connecticut River in Essex, on Jan. 22 and a mature BALD EAGLE was seen in the same area on Feb. 3-4.

Niantic, Waterford, and New London: During the last week in January, 3 MEADOWLARKS were seen on North Drive in Niantic. A flock of about 200 CANADA GEESE were seen in Waterford on Jan. 19 and again on Feb. 9. On Jan. 22, a BLACK-HEADED GULL, a European bird and a rare visitor, was seen feeding among sea lettuce in Greens Harbor off Pequot Ave. A MARSH HAWK and a HARBOR SEAL were seen at Millstone on the 24th and on the 25th, a PINTAIL was sighted in Wescott Cove at Harkness along with a male WOOD DUCK. In Alewife Cove, 8 GADWALL were feeding from Feb. 2 to the 8th. On the 7th, a COMMON SNIPE and a RED-NECKED GREBE were seen off Smith Cove in Quaker Hill, and another was seen that day near Magonk Point. At Pleasure Beach, 10 SURF SCOTERS were sighted and an uncommon pair of COMMON SCOTERS were seen near Magonk Point, both on Feb. 8th. A GREY SQUIRREL was already building his nest outside the Science Center in the Arboretum on Feb. 9th, and BLUE JAYS and CARDINALS have been calling since the beginning of the month.

Rhode Island Shoreline: On Jan. 17, the N. L. Bird Club noted a RED-NECKED GREBE at Point Judith, an ICELAND GULL at Galilee, 3 FLICKERS among the phragmites on Great Island, a HERMIT THRUSH at Quonochontaug and 2 MEADOWLARKS on Old Post Road in Charleston. A MARSH HAWK was sighted at Point Judith on Jan. 23.

Contributors to this column were: Grace Bissell, Martha Capizzano, Mrs. Charles Chapin, Bob Dyer, Sam Knox, Mrs. A. L. McGovern and Mrs. Mary Sunega.

ACTIVITIES FOR MARCH

Saturday, March 6... Meeting for potential Junior Curators. See page 9 for details.

Saturday, March 13 and March 20... Workshop for Junior High students, grades 7-9, "Making Wooden Bluebird Houses." The following week a "Bluebird Trail" will be established on a local farm in a conservation effort to bring back a stronghold of bluebirds to this area. Registration required. Limit 10 students. First week, 10:00 A.M. Second week, 9:00 A.M.

Saturday, March 13... Outing Club hike in Devil's Hopyard in East Haddam. Meet at the Science Center, 10:00 A.M. and bring a trail lunch.

Sunday, March 21... 3:00 P.M. Lyman Allyn Museum Auditorium. Family Films include Walt Disney's "Water Birds" plus a pollution film, "The River Must Live." Free to members. Non-members 50¢ donation.

Saturday, March 27... 7:00 A.M. Nature Walk for members on Bluff Point. Meet at parking area by entrance road.

Saturday, March 27... 10:00 A.M. Junior Members' Workshop for grades 1-3, "How Plants Grow" Registration required. Limit 15 children.

NATURALIST NOTEBOOK

Published by the
THAMES SCIENCE CENTER

Gallows Lane
New London, Connecticut 06320
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The NATURALIST NOTEBOOK is published 10 times annually. Subscription available through membership only.

The Thames Science Center is a nonprofit organization seeking a quality environment through education.

The active support of children and adults in the Science Center, its programs, activities and efforts is earnestly solicited.

MARTHA M. CAPIZZANO
Editor

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